

Cycling Road Race Start/Finish. Mission Viejo, 1984



MATRIX is supported in part  
by a grant from the National  
Endowment for the Arts, a  
Federal Agency.



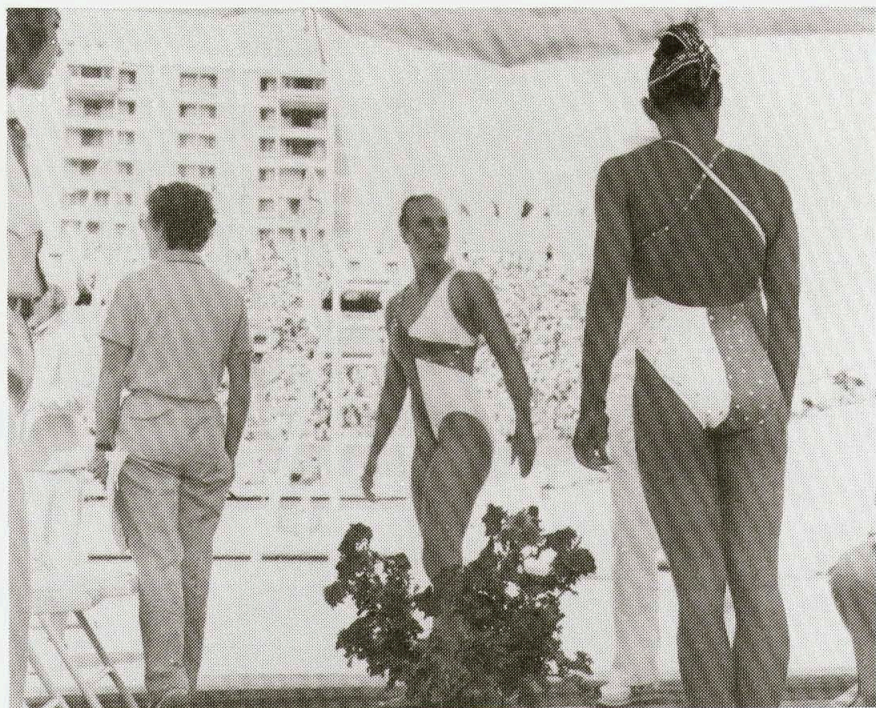
During August of 1984, Robert Cumming was on assignment in Los Angeles, California as one of ten commissioned photographers granted access to the athletic games by the Olympic Committee. Cumming spent two-and-a-half weeks immersed in this spectacle of grand proportion. He chose to concentrate his photographs on the equipment used in closely monitored athletic events. It is a world in which the intricate struggle of trainers and coaches, equipment and gear, timers, measuring rods, surveying units, aerodynamics, electronics, video play-back machines, etc., coalesce to give an individual or team the winning combination of forces. What Cumming presents is the complexity of the cincture through which the athlete must wade.

Robert Cumming's photographs teeter on the fulcrum of a world which balances the realm of objective reality - his pictures are full of objects, of things - and the mental state of interpreting just how those things affect, influence and interact in today's world. His is not a simple glorification of the wonders or triumphs of the technological advances of the twentieth century, for in almost each image technology is the master, the director who controls and at times dominates man's actions. The athlete is no longer at the middle of center court as he was from the time of the Renaissance through the early days of the modern era, an age when man's perception of the universe was totally dependent on his centrality. In Cumming's world view, a significant power has been given to "things" and he enjoys seeing them do their work. This is not a hostile environment, but what is portrayed is a complex, highly developed state, a mighty empire of wires, forces, sounds, lights,

beams, waves, precision instruments and calibrated machines. These photographs show athletes and support personnel moving through the world with as much ease as strolling through a botanical garden of flowers, trees and shrubbery. Cumming has at times in the past integrated his training as a sculptor, a draftsman and illustrator/author/book publisher into his photography. Although the interplay with sculpture no longer dominates his work as it once did, even today, when Cumming looks through the view finder on his camera, he still senses with pleasure the tactile properties of objects, and makes mental notes of the items he photographs as sources for future sculptures.

In these images Cumming presents a tightly woven compositional style, relying on formal structure to enclose the picture frame. Coming from a descriptive tradition that has roots in the work of Atget, Kertesz and Walker Evans, Cumming chooses to describe the world around him using wit, charm and beauty. For instance, his picture Rowing. 4-Man Scull. Lake Casitas, is a 1984 interpretation of Seurat's Sunday on the Grand-Jatte (1884). Figures line the water's edge in discrete groups of twos or threes, having little personal interaction outside of their units. What dominates the scene is the scull, taut with a skin-like covering which is glistening in the mid-summer southern California sunlight. It juts across the foreground in a forceful line which plays against the rigid two-dimensionality of the picture plane. With an obvious manipulation of scale, the people are herded into the upper stratum of the photograph while the scull stretches out to dominate the rectangle. For Seurat, people controlled the





Synchronized Swimmers. USC Swim Stadium, 1984

landscape, urban dwellers savoring the experience of an afternoon outing. For Cumming, equipment, not people, fill the scene, leaving so little room in the picture that several spectators' heads are cut off at the top. An overturned scull caps the horizon while providing a thin, wafer like vista of the lake beyond the sand's edge.

In Synchronized Swimmers. USC Swim Stadium, like Botticelli's Birth of Venus (c. 1482), Cumming's swimmer arises out of the center of the picture, born not from a shell, but from potted petunias. In bathing suits sequinned with starfish the two swimmers present the viewer with a back and front sequence that gives movement within the picture space. The figure on the left holds the frame, directing the viewer's attention to the action, and the canopy above crowns the image. Cumming stopped working with black

and white film about five years ago, and he is now a master at sensing the coloristic possibilities of photographs. While the purple of the petunias holds the center of the image, it also plays off the wild orange of the officials' garb. The canopy over the swimmers protects the figures from the harsh sunlight and provides Cumming with the chance to juxtapose the darker foreground (shown in sharp focus) with the lighter background (shown in subdued pastel tones).

At the Olympics, Cumming was constantly adjusting his technique to specific conditions: natural light (outdoors) or artificial light (indoors); distance, near or far, from the subject; and simply gaining access amidst all the activity (that is, the ability to get inside the stadium or near a potential vista sometimes took great effort in itself). Fur-



thermore, because he uses a 4x5 field view camera on a tripod and not a hand held camera, it takes time for Cumming to get set up to make a shot. Working within the parameters of this structure, he selects a spot which gives him visual stabilizers and then waits for the action to pass in front of the camera's eye. Scoring Equipment. Fencing Warm-Ups. Long Beach Convention Center is a case in point. Using the two striped poles and the aqua-covered table as formal referents, Cumming arranged his camera and was prepared for the action to appear. By focusing on the table with the wiring spilling out from above, he highlights the flexibility of the players, with their speed and agility, and the rigidity of the environment in which they must perform.

Robert Cumming was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1943. He received a BFA in painting from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1965, and a MFA from the University of Illinois two years later. Throughout his professional career he has worked with sculpture, drawing, bookmaking and photography. He has received individual artist fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1972, 1975 and 1982, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 and participated in the Artist in Residence Exchange Program, Japan-American Friendship Commission in 1981. He currently lives in Suffield, Connecticut and is Associate Professor at the University of Hartford's Hartford Art School.

Francine Zorn Trachtenberg  
Adjunct Curator of Photography  
Wadsworth Atheneum

Works in MATRIX:  
Each photograph is a Type C color print, made in 1984.

Bows and Arrows. Archery. El Dorado Park, 17 1/2" x 21 1/2".

Fencing. Armorer Wiring Epee. Long Beach Convention Center, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Communication Cables. Cycling Road Race. Start/Finish. Mission Viejo, 21" x 17 1/2".

Rowing. 4-Man Scull. Lake Casitas, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Oars. British Rowing Team Boat Storage Tents, Lake Casitas, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Scoring Equipment. Fencing Warm-Ups. Long Beach Convention Center, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Cycling Road Race Start/Finish. Mission Viejo, 21 1/2" x 17 1/8".

Starting Line Official. Boat Storage Tents, Lake Casitas, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Synchronized Swimmers. USC Swim Stadium, 17 1/2" x 21 1/2".

Swiss Timing Counter. Track + Field. L.A. Coliseum, 17 1/2" x 21 3/4".

Track + Field Surveyors with Transits; Coliseum, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Scoreboard Preparation, Coliseum Access Tunnel, 17 1/4" x 21 1/2".

Water Polo Balls. Practice Pool. Near L. A. Coliseum, 17 1/2" x 21 1/2".

All works in this exhibition are presented courtesy of the artist.

Robert Cumming's proposal to the Olympic Committee, November, 1983:

Since discontinuing manipulative photography around 1977, my work has gone out in the world, picking up the commonplace, the ordinary, as well as the paradoxical, the mundane and the exceptional. When granted access, I've tried to train the camera on places and things I feel are squarely in the eye of the 20th century milieu. Some of these have been quark and particle research facilities at Fermilab, Hiroshima today, points along the Berlin wall, robotic assembly lines, etc.

Producing an Olympic portfolio would mean being granted access to an event of world focus; history in the present. I would turn my camera on the athletes and athletic events using equipment; cycling, rowing, weight-lifting, etc., and envision a portfolio of athletes and objects together in the framing edge of the photograph.

Afterword, August, 1984:

Written some 9 months before the Opening Ceremonies, the project could anticipate but in no way come close to dealing with the difficulties of photographing the Olympics as competition between athletes. Although we all had high-level clearance, security was formidable and with the hundred-fold modes of access enforced here to the letter, there at whim, it became as difficult and complex a problem as taking the pictures themselves. Being rejected at the last security barrier only a few feet from the day's pictures, or being escorted from the field in the midst of a promising series, could be as demoralizing as hearing from the lab that one's film had been exposed to light. What became more and more apparent the first week of the Olympics was the enormity

of organization; the size of the media army, communication in and out of the Media Press Center, special transit systems, visible and highly non-visible security forces, Fuji's freeway film couriers...75,000 uniforms by Levi Strauss, etc....in short, a peripheral whole that dwarfed the games themselves. The varied paraphernalia began to show in the photographs as often as athletic equipment; media cables and computers as well as starting blocks.

The main eye of the Games was television connecting it live via-satellite with anticipated audiences of 2 billion...Second after it was the daily coverage in the world-and-picture print medium; the sports writer/photographers...The caption-reinforced images were...F-2 at 1/500th of a second; reduced by cropping to the level of symbol; thin planes of focus both photographically and contextually.

Ours will be the third and smallest exhibit...Used to circulating in society's periphery as artists are conditioned to, the 10 pre-game proposals seemed to have been predisposed to activity around the perimeter. The issues of not wanting to become sports photographers for two weeks aside, we had to deal with those perpetual polaries, form and content. Of several dozen of my last-round-of editing losers was a fine shot of diving gold medalist Greg Louganis which, without caption, could be any smiling young man beside any pool that week...and seemed less formally interesting, less engaging than the final negative chosen for the...show.

When memories of the difficulties have been dulled...and after the details of the experience have been rounded-off with time, I don't see how the event can possibly be forgotten.



Selected one-man exhibitions:  
John Gibson Gallery, NYC '73,  
'75, '77; California Institute  
of Arts, Valencia, CA '73; Los  
Angeles Institute of  
Contemporary Art, '76; Real Art  
Ways, Hartford '78, '82;  
Gilbert Gallery, Chicago '78,  
'79, '80, '81; Friends of  
Photography, Carmel, CA '79;  
Institute of Modern Art,  
Brisbane, Australia, '79; Rhode  
Island School of Design,  
Providence, RI '80; Chicago Art  
Institute, '81; Castelli  
Graphics, NYC '82, '84, '85;  
Galerie Watari, Tokyo, 1984.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Chicago Art by Telephone '69;  
Detroit Institute of Arts Other  
Ideas '69; Oberlin College,  
Oberlin, OH Art in the Mind  
'70; Walker Art Center  
Minneapolis 9 Artists/9 Spaces  
'70; Los Angeles County Museum  
24 Young LA Artists '71;  
Newport Harbor Art Museum,  
Newport Beach, CA Books by  
Artists '72; Museum of Modern  
Art, NYC Picture Puzzles '75;  
Museum of Modern Art of the  
City of Paris, Paris Biennial  
'77; Whitney Museum of American  
Art, NYC Whitney Biennial '77;  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Contemporary American  
Photographic Works '77-80;  
Museum of Modern Art, NYC  
Mirrors & Windows - American  
Photography Since 1960 '78; San  
Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Fabricated to be Photographed  
'79; Corcoran Gallery,  
Washington, DC Color as Form  
'82; Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston Target III: in Sequence  
'82; Hayden Gallery, MIT,  
Cambridge, MA Contemporary  
Portraiture '83; Pompidou  
Center, Paris Images Fabriques  
'83; The New Museum, NYC  
Language, Drama, Source and  
Vision '83; The Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
10 Photographers. Olympic Images  
'84.

©Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985

Selected bibliography by  
Cumming:

A Training in the Arts, Coach  
House Press, Toronto 1973.

Discourse on Domestic  
Disorder, Irvine, CA 1975.

The Nation's Capital in  
Photography, Corcoran Gallery,  
Washington, DC 1976.

Equilibrium and the Rotary  
Disc, Diana's Bimonthly, vol.  
vii, 1980.

Selected bibliography about  
Cumming:

Coleman, A.D. "The  
Directional Mode," Artforum,  
vol. 15 no. 1 (September '76),  
p. 55+.

Rubinfiem, Leo. "Through  
Western Eyes," Art In America,  
vol. 66 no. 5 (September/  
October '78), p.80+.

Huginin, James. "Robert Cum-  
ming 'trucage,' Falsehoods,"  
Afterimage, vol. 6 no. 5 (Dec-  
ember '78), p. 8+.

Gruber, Don. "Quandaries of  
Interpretation," Artweek, vol.  
10 no. 11 (March '79), p. 11+.

Alinder, James. Cumming Pho-  
tographs, Untitled 18, Friends  
of Photography, Carmel, CA 1979.

Gever, Martha. "Circular Rea-  
soning," Afterimage, vol. 9 no.  
9 (April '82), p. 16.

Grundberg, Andy. "A Purpose-  
ful Blurring of Illusion and  
Reality," The New York Times  
(Sunday, May 30, '82), p. 27.

Grundberg, Andy. "Currents  
American Photography Today,"  
Modern Photography, vol. 46 no.  
10 (November '82), p. 114+.

Hagan, Charles. "Robert Cum-  
ming's Subject Object," Art-  
forum, vol. 21 no. 10 (Summer  
1983), p. 36+.

Grundberg, Andy. "His Imagin-  
ation Reshapes Reality," The  
New York Times (Sunday, January  
22, '84), p. 30.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Anti-  
Olympus," 10 Photographers.  
Olympic Images, The Los Angeles  
Center for Photographic Stud-  
ies, The Museum of Contemporary  
Art, LA, Los Angeles Olympic  
Organizing Committee, 1984.